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The case for an independent CIA head

Were there no other salutary outcome, the new evidence showing that Gen. William Westmoreland and Gen. Daniel Graham falsified reports on Viet Cong strength has mightily reinforced the first law of communication. As applied to intelligence systems, this reads: The greater the salience of the issue, the less subordinates are likely to report negative information to their boss.

President Lyndon Johnson had to believe we could at least hold our own in Vietnam. When working-level intelligence officers produced statistics showing that the enemy was gaining in

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strength, some gatekeeper in the system was bound to distort the information flow. Gen. Graham filled this sycophantish role and Gen. Westmoreland backstopped him.

This law is really too well established to need additional verification. Bad news has always had to struggle to reach a sovereign. Go back to Moses.

When he sent the 12 spies into Canaan, the nervous Nellies who reported back that the land was well defended and should not be attacked met untimely ends. Only Joshua and Caleb, who told Moses what he wanted to hear, flourished.

Things are no different now. An administration that did not want to hear bad things about the Shah of Iran did not hear them. There was abundant negative intelligence in the system, but it could not work its way to the top.

President Reagan may be different; he may be a moderate posing as an idealogue, a man without rigid commitments and preconceptions. He appears to have accepted intelligence which ran counter to his established beliefs, as for instance about the consequences of providing Taiwan with advanced fighter planes.

But some of the policies to which Reagan is committed may be vital to his worldview and candid subordinates may not be able to get through to him. If one of his unchallengeable beliefs creates danger of nuclear war and the intelligence gatekeepers filter out awkward facts, mankind might come to an abrupt end.

There is really only one way to substantially avoid sanitized intelligence on highly controversial issues. The director of the Central Intelligence Agency must be

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entirely free of presidential control. The model here is the auditor general of the United States, whose term of office is 15 years and who cannot be dismissed or punished if his General Accounting Office reports that some sacred cow is actually a mangy cur.

As we saw in Vietnam, the CIA, whose director now serves at the pleasure of the president, knew that Pentagon reports were inaccurate, tried for a while to rebut them, but gave up the struggle under pressure. This happened in that crucial period just before the Tet offensive.

A really independent CIA director could not be thus intimidated. Consider how a scenario in El Salvador might benefit from an insulated intelligence operation. Suppose that the belief that the Salvadoran rebels are weak and without popular support is a central element in Reagan's policy toward that country. Under the present structure, no contrary official intelligence can reach the top. The only chance for a different view at the decision-making level would come from an entirely unlikely event: that the president or secretary of

state chose to believe some biased, sensation-seeking, left-leaning reporter.

Intelligence aficionados to whom I have suggested this drastic remedy sputter, cough and eventually object: that if the president cannot control his director of intelligence, he cannot be assured of getting intelligence on subjects of vital import. Why this would be true they are unable to explain. Congress certainly gets the reports it orders from an independent auditor general.

Of course, a strong-willed president can always refuse to believe bad news. Even a courageous intelligence chief, well insulated from reprisal, may not be able to penetrate the defenses of a true believer. But our chances for survival would be somewhat better if the ultimate decision makers cannot stifle inconvenient messages before they are delivered. Intelligence should be outside the normal chain of command. This would be no panacea, but it would increase the chances that someone would tell the emperor when he has no clothes on.

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